News

In Kashmir, a father's fight against forgetfulness

Seven years after the death of his only son, Mohammad Ashraf Mattoo is still struggling to find justice in Srinagar.



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It has been seven years since Mattoo's life seemingly came to a standstill. He stopped going to work and his hair quickly turned all white.

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Tufail, his son, then 17 years old, was killed on June 11, 2010, near a sports stadium in the old city of Srinagar in Indian-administered Kashmir. "He wanted to become a scientist," Mattoo told Al Jazeera.

"Whenever he would take money from us or his grandmother, he would promise that once he earns, he will return us. He was a very different child. We would play hide-and-seek after his return from school," Mattoo said.

It was calm that day, seven years ago, when Tufail left his tuition at 5:30pm in the evening and boarded a local bus. He de-boarded and was holding a five rupees coin in his hand that his father had given him for the fare when he saw policemen running towards him, eyewitnesses later told Mattoo.

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The incident near Srinagar's Rajouri Kadal locality, initially, seemed routine. The area is part of the old city of Srinagar and a stronghold of anti-India protesters, who often clash with Indian police and paramilitary personnel.

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Mohammad Ashraf Mattoo vowed to continue his struggle for justice [Rifat Fareed/Al Jazeera]

In June 2010, anger was brewing across Kashmir against a staged gunfight in which three civilians were killed in a remote mountainous area in north Kashmir. Sporadic protests were taking place against the killings and the region was tense.

“The police fired tear gas shells at him killing him on the spot,” says Mattoo. Tufail’s skull had cracked open by the impact of a shell that had hit his head so forcefully that parts of his brain spilled on the dirt of Gani Memorial Sports Stadium.

After his son’s death, Mattoo, who had a successful business in handicrafts,

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Mattoo has preserved the notebooks, computer, laptop, camera and the photographs – souvenirs of his son. The room where Mattoo sits has the framed pic

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Shortly after the killing in July 2010, the family approached court, which directed police to register the incident and carry out an investigation.

After more than a year, the police team submitted a case closure report that the killers were “untraceable”. Later, a Special Investigation Team of Crime Branch also closed its investigation by declaring Tufail’s killers “untraced”. The closure report said there was insufficient evidence available to identify Mattoo’s killers.

The government in Kashmir had also appointed a one-man commission headed by a retired judge to probe the 2010 killings. “I told them to show me the report (of commission) but they refused to show me anything,” Mattoo said. “I have no faith in the state-run human rights commission; they don’t deliver any justice.”

The family objected to the police closure report in court and the case is still ongoing.

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for many years, sometimes the family member fighting the case dies or the witnesses die," Murkutlu told Al Jazeera.

Mattoo's wife is withdrawn from his struggle. "He is just tearing his shoes by going to the court again and again, who has got justice in Kashmir 'til now? He is hoping against the hope," Rubeena, Mattoo's wife, said.

Rubeena, 45, looks older than her age. Tufail's death has made her silent and her eyes are covered with dark circles.

The family members say that they were offered monetary compensation by the government but they refused to take it. "We don't need money, how can you kill someone's son and then give them money?" says Rubeena.

Mattoo says that a day before his death, he had a long conversation with his son. "I didn't know it would be the last time that I was talking to my son. When he would come from his classes, I would hide behind the door and jump over him to kiss his head, feet, hands. We were more like friends," he said.

"He has left a void in our family that can never be filled. What happens to us and how we feel that can never be explained," he said.

On the day Tufail was killed, he had shaved Mattoo's stubble and told him: you take a lot of time in doing any work. "I opened my wardrobe and he wore my black coat. I showed him the picture of his grandfather (who was a government officer) and told him you will become like him. He didn't become an officer, but

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In June 2010, the killing of Tufail triggered a second of wave of civilian unrest in the disputed region and more than 120 civilians, mostly teenagers were killed.

“Justice has not been delivered to anyone in Kashmir. The government delays these cases so that people get tired and stop fighting for the justice. They discourage people to take the legal course by their tactics,” Mattoo said.

“They talk about peace and I feel peace cannot come to Kashmir ’til there is justice. Peace will come when you give justice to people who have lost their sons, bothers, fathers,” he said.

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